

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 71

HERA

"Do not even think about it your highness."

I seize my attempts to come down from the enormous black animal and glower down at the Chief Ryder by my side.

"Do not even think about what? You aren't even looking at me, how do you know what I am trying to do or not?"

"I do not need to look..." And then he turns and looks up at me. "...I just know."

This horse is easily almost twice the size of those in Averia, and sitting on it alone, feeling it muscles ripple and bunch beneath me each time it lifts and stamps its hooves, is quite frightening.

But it is nothing compared to the absolute terror I feel for him.

The vision had not been clear or precise enough, so even though I know he is danger, I have no idea exactly what the threat is.

And worrying about that is almost enough to make me forget about my fear of horses.

"Leo, I need to go to him."

"No, you want to go to him."

I throw my hands in the air and let them drop to my side in exasperation.

"There is no difference!"

Leo's eyes narrow.

"There is. I understand that you are worried about him and heaven knows why he allowed you to convince him to bring you into a situation that could turn deadly at the drop of a hat, but if you are in danger he will not be able to concentrate and quite frankly, neither will I."

"But..."

"But nothing Hera. The best thing you can do for him and for me is to keep that pretty behind of yours on that horse...your grace"

Even his rants are delivered in the most level of tones.

I scoff and turn away from him in a huff, conveniently ignoring the part where he asked me to sit still and where he called me pretty.

I look straight ahead to where the king stands, surrounded by his men, his side tilted towards to me,

Although I can see them clearly, they are a little too far away for me to hear exactly what is going on.

But I do not even need to hear to know, even from this distance, that it does not bode well.

Does not bode well at all.

The person standing across from him, the one to whom he speaks to is a big dragonkin man who although he appears to have been somewhat soften by age, is nearly as tall as Midas and almost twice as wide.

He has some men standing behind him as well and they all have weapons of some sort clutched in their grasps; maces and clubs even quite a number of axes and swords.

The dragonkin's face is half hidden by a bushy white beard but even from my position, perched on the king's horse and quite a few paces away, I can tell from his gestures and the way he struggles to keep still that he is angry.

Immensely so.

Yet, there is an undercurrent of sadness to his anger, a sadness so thick I can almost see it.

He is grieving.

I do not know how I know this.

Or how I had known Midas had been thinking about killing some people.

I just do.

Being able to know things like that, bits and pieces of information that I should not, in all likelihood be able to know...it frightens me.

What is happening to me?

I focus my attention back to the group of men straight ahead.

"What exactly is going on?"

Leo turns to stare at me, his eyebrows riding so high up his fore head that they nearly disappear into his hair line.

"You mean you do not know?"

“No?”

“And yet you followed him here, why?”

I may have told Midas all about my dreams and premonitions and maybe I am even starting to learn how not to fight them, but I am not ready or even confident enough to tell anyone else just yet.

Especially when I myself do not even understand how or why it is happening.

So I look away and avoid the chief Ryder’s probing gaze. “Are you going to tell me Leo or shall I find out myself?”

“If you come down from that horse your grace, I have the permission of the king to toss you over my shoulders and fly you back to the castle in my dragon form.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

His eyes narrow and I know he would.

“Fine. But as your queen, I demand that you tell me what is going on.”

He stares at me in silence for a moment and then a smirk finds its way to his lips.

But rather than toss out the sarcastic comment I can practically see dancing around in his head, he bows slightly.

“As you wish your grace. We are in the clan of Adarin.

They and their neighbors, the clan of Rardath, have always been involved in a sort of cold feud that precedes even the oldest amongst them but recently things have... gotten out of hand.”

“How so?”

“In the recent months there have been obvious, deliberate acts of provocations, disturbances amongst them and each clan believes the other to be responsible.

“I sense from your tone that things are no longer as simple as that.”

“Both clans deny crossing the borders between them and maintain they have no hand in any of the issues plaguing the other. The problem is there are no other settlements for miles on either side of them.”

“Do you think they are telling the truth?”

Leo turns towards the scene up ahead. “I do. As does the king.”

I frown. “So if neither one of them is responsible, then who...”

But even as I ask the question, I realize that the answer is already buried somewhere in my sub consciousness, hovering in the grey, just out of reach.

Goosebumps break out on my arm and I wince as that painfully familiar pressure in my head begins again.

But Leo, whose attention is still fixed straight ahead, does not notice my discomfort.

Midas says something to the older man who then proceeds to shake his head vehemently, becoming even more agitated than he was before.

“That is Adarin, the chief of his clan. His son accidently lost two of his fingers to a trap set by Rardath as a result of the skirmish between the two neighbors.”

His son...son....son...

The pressure in my head is a living thing, filling every crevice of my mind, bending my will to it.

I grip the hump of the saddle in an effort to steady myself, holding it until my fingers cramp on the hard material.

The world appears to have narrowed and my heart slams itself against my ribs, over and over again, until my chest starts to hurt.

I can still hear Leo, can tell that he still speaks but his voice seems to be fading in and out and I have to strain to make out the words.

“The son remained ill ever since, bedridden, which is strange in itself as dragonkin do not succumb to their injuries so easily. He was kept in that hut over there.”

My eyes, painful and heavy, follow the tip of his finger to a small structure that sits a little off the left of Midas and the others.

The moment my eyes fall on the hut, I recognize it and everything changes.

“Where is the son now?”

Leo hesitates, like he wishes to spare me the details.

I do not tell him that he need not have bothered, I already know too much.

The chief Ryder sighs.

“This morning, we received word that the lad in question is now...”

“Dead.”

Leo’s head snaps towards me. “How did you...”

The words fade from his lips, lost in the wind as he notices the discomfort etched on my face, the way my hands clutch desperately at my chest.

“Your highness, what is it...are you unwell?”

But I almost do not hear him.

All my attention is fixed straight ahead, on the scene unfolding before me.

Two images, interposed upon each other. One a vision, one happening in reality.

I see Midas say something to the chief Adarin and the man goes quiet, appears to calm down.

Another dragonkin man, the one dressed like a Ryder of rank steps forward and says something to the king, pointing towards the hut.

I blink once...twice but the picture remains the same.

The hut, the one in my vision is soaked in a sort of black haze, similar to yet not quite like the one I had seen in my dreams; the dark cloud that had wrapped itself around Midas.

If he goes in there....

Trap...trap...trap!!!

A voice, loud and screaming, throws the word around in my head, repeating it over and over again.

I realize that the voice is mine and it is so loud and deafening that I am unaware that I in fact am not saying it out loud.

As I watch, the Midas in my vision and the one in reality move as one towards the hut.

“No...”

I want to shout, to stop him but he is too far away and for some reason my throat has clamped up, fear reducing my voice to a single gut wrenching whisper.

Two more steps and he will be there.

Two more steps and it will be too late.

“Your highness, what are you doing?”

“I have to go to him, I have to stop him.”

“You can’t...”

But my fear is propelling me forward and I swing my leg around the opposite side of the horse and away from Leo.

Then with my hands behind me, I push off the animal.

But the horse is too high up and I have dismounted awkwardly, my urgency making me careless.

By the time I notice it, I am already airborne and I would not doubt have twisted my ankle or even worse had Leo not moved around the horse in a blur of speed.

Catching me before I can fall awkwardly to the ground.

He holds me against his chest, one hand under my knees, the other firmly around my back.

“Hera for crying out loud...”

He is angry, worried that I could have hurt myself.

But the pain of a broken ankle is nothing compared to the anguish I feel as I watch Midas lift his feet to step over the threshold of that hut, heading straight into the arms of darkness.

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MIDAS

Pain... white hot and blinding.

It shoots up his spine, wraps itself around his head like some sort of barbed rope of poisonous thorns.

He staggers backward, away from the yawning entryway of the hut with his head in his hands.

Voices ring out around him.

“Your highness!!”

He registers a hand on his shoulder; Adarin, the dragonkin chief.

“My king, are you okay?”

The king straightens but does not answer.

He is okay.

But only in the sense that the pain he had felt, had not been his.

His instincts take over and he covers the distance with lightning speed, is by her side in an instant.

“Hera...”

She reaches for him, her cheeks stained with tears and he pulls her away from Leo and into the circle of his arms.

“I....I thought...I thought you were...”

She sounds too choked up to even speak properly so he strokes her hair, tries to calm her down.

And then for the first time, Midas whirls on his chief Ryder in anger, his teeth clenched. “I told you to watch her. How did she get hurt?”

She sniffs. “It was my fault.”

“Leo is faster, he should have stopped you.”

Leo in turn does not bat an eyelid in the face of his king’s anger.

Neither does he make any attempts to defend himself. He knows better.

He simply bows his head but before he can apologize...

“He did stop me and I am not hurt.”

Midas frowns, focusing his attention back to her and pulling away so he can look her in the eyes.

She claims not to be hurt but he knows what he felt and he is about to ask her if she is okay but she beats him to it and he frowns even harder.

“What do you mean am I okay?”

Everyone looks on in silence, wondering what in all the realms is going on.

He watches her swallow and glance fearfully at the hut where the body of Adarin’s son lay.

The hut he had been just moments away from stepping into.

Instantly his senses sharpen.

Something is terribly wrong and she knows.

“What is it?”

But she does not look directly at him.

He can tell she knows something, something everyone else does not.

He can also tell that she is unsure, that she doubts herself, is afraid that she might be wrong.

All those years of hearing people telling her she was imagining things, making them up for attention.

He tilts her chin so she is looking at no one else but him. "Tell me."

Two simple words; heavy with all the things left unsaid.

And he watches the self-doubt in her eyes fade slightly.

She exhales.

"It was a trap. They wanted you to go in and I am...I am not sure how or why but if you had stepped into that hut...you would never have come back out."

Midas freezes.

What she is insinuating...that his own men had just tried to kill him...it can't be.

And yet by Hades he believes her.

More than anything else, enough that he does not even ask her if she is sure of what she says.

He simply looks at Leo and the chief Ryder raises his hand.

A single signal, not a word uttered.

And all the Ryders who had come with the king surround Adarin and his men, sword draw and pointed towards the clansmen and their Chief.

Adarin turns even redder than he was before, indignation seeping out from every pore of his body.

"Your highness! What is the meaning of this?"

But Midas does not care for the clan chief's rage.

He is a thousand times angrier and he struggles to keep Er'gan from bursting to the surface.

He is not only infuriated, he feels...betrayed and more than thoroughly confused.

How dare they?

Why would Adarin's clan do this...what did they possibly stand to gain?

It makes no sense.

He approaches the men, huddled together and surrounded on either side by sharp swords.

"What did you do Adarin?"

The cold, calm manner in which he speaks is somehow worse than it would have been were he to be yelling at the top of his voice.

The dragonkin's eyes go wide at the accusation. "My Lord...I do not understand what you are talking about."

"The queen has cause to believe that there is some sort of trap set in wait in that hut where your son lies."

The chief begins to sweat.

Yet whether it is from indignation at the accusation or from a guilty conscience the king is not sure.

"That is a lie!"

"So you call your queen a liar and accuse her of attempting to frame you?"

"She is but some human lass who knows next to nothing of our people or our customs. How could you possibly believe her words... over me?"

Midas bristles and his voice drops even lower. "You will speak about the queen with respect Adarin or you will not speak at all."

"I mean no offense my king. But why would I and my people wish you harm?"

"Why indeed..."

Midas steps closer, the swords of his Ryders falling away to allow him step closer to Adarin.

"You were one of my father's most trusted advisers and I had thought that you were mine as well."

"I am."

"And it is for that reason alone that I have not sent your head flying from your body."

"But my king..."

"So I will ask you one last time Adarin..." Midas reaches behind him, his hand closing around the hilt of his sword. "...What did you do?"

Adarin may appear to be telling the truth but even Midas' dragon can sense that something is just not right.

Yet rather than confess, to his surprise, the clan chief raises his chin high in defiance.

"I... have done nothing."

Midas eyes narrow, the red beginning to consume the gold but before he can free his sword from its sheath...

“My lord...”

She steps gingerly through the circle of swords, towards them.

“My lord if I may...” She lays a hand on his arm and that is all it takes to calm him down.

Enough for him to let his sword remain sheathed...for now.

He can see that she is still shaken, unsure of herself.

But he also sees her hide it, push it beneath the surface and he nods gently.

She steps towards Adarin who towers over her, large and imposing yet when she finally does speak, her voice is firm and sure.

And a sense of pride that she is his fills the king with unexpected warmth.

“Adarin.”

“My queen.”

“I am sorry about your son.”

The man grunts in response and bows his head, not far enough for Midas’ liking but he lets it slide, not wanting to interrupt her.

She lifts her face to the man. “May I ask you a question?”

Adarin glances from her to the king and back to her again.

The bigger, more fearsome man shifts uneasily beneath her gaze as if surprised that the queen would ask his permission before speaking.

“Yes...”

A warning growl from Midas.

“My queen...I mean yes, my queen”

“In the beginning, when the troubles in your clan first began, how did you come to know that Rardath was behind them?”

“There is no one else for miles in either direction. The Elder forest stands between us and the capital and the nearest settlement is several leagues away. Who else could it be?”

But then she shakes her head as if disappointed in his answer.

“That is not the reason.”

At the point even Midas’ attention is entirely on her, the wheels in his head spinning so fast, his mind struggles to catch up.

The chief looks away saying nothing.

“Answer the queen Adarin.”

The man sighs. “I received word. A dragonkin...”

Midas can feel Er’gan perk up within him and he voices the dragon’s question out loud.

“What dragonkin?”

“A stranger, one new to our clan. My son befriended him on a journey to the capital; he helped him watch over his horses and our goods as they rode through the Elder forest.”

Alarm bells have begun to go off in the king’s head.

Getting louder with each word that falls from the mouth of the clan chief Adarin.

“The man returned with my son, deciding to spend a while with us and that night, he saw men from the clan of Rardath, slimy cowards that they are, slinking away in the dead of night and the next morning we awoke to the smell of smoke and fire, half of our crops burned to ashes.”

Out the corner of his eyes, Midas sees her beginning to shake slightly as Adarin speaks about this strange dragonkin so he steps up to her, placing his hand on the small of her back until she stills and then he turns back to the chief.

“So you took the word of some stranger and believed that Rardath, your neighbor of more than a hundred years suddenly awoke up one morning and decided to burn your crops to the ground, why?”

Adarin frowns, thinking on the words.

“I...I do not know. He was quite persuasive.”

“A compelling spell?”

Perhaps. Midas agrees with his dragon but Adarin is speaking again.

“Be that as it may, why would he lie to me? In fact, when my son was injured in a trap set by the men of Rardath and lay sick in bed, it was he who stayed up, night after night, watching over him...tending to his needs.”

She begins to tremble beside him again and though she tries hard to hide it, when she does speak, her voice is no longer calm or controlled.

She sounds scared...

“This stranger...was he the one who brought you the news of your son’s passing?”

“No, but it was he who discovered...discovered the body and immediately he sent a servant to me but when I arrived, my son was already dead.”

“And the dragonkin stranger?”

It is Midas who asks this and Adarin frowning, opens his mouth to speak.

“The stranger...”

“He was already gone wasn’t he?”

The words fall quietly from her mouth, barely a whisper, but they all hear it.

Adarin frowns, his fists clenching and unclenching as clarity fills his eyes.

It appears he is slowly beginning to understand what is going on.

That he and his entire clan have strung along like a ball of yarn, tossed back and forth in the hands of an enemy far wiser than they have been.

The chief has been played.

They all have.

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MIDAS

A wave of his hand and the pointed ends of the swords surrounding Adarin and his men fall away.

But the blades themselves remain unsheathed.

“Who else has been in the room with Adarin’s son since the stranger dragonkin left?”

The captain of the band of Ryders who has been watching the borders between the two clans steps forward.

“No one my king. The very moment I heard the news, I set guards at the door and instructed that no one was to be allowed in until your arrival.”

Midas nods and then turns to the clan chief.

He no longer suspects the older dragonkin man of being behind whatever ambush was laid out for him yet he has to ask.

“Did you go into the room Adarin?”

“No my king, I did not.”

“Did any one of your men?”

“I do not believe so my King.”

“And no one has seen this stranger since then?”

The men of the clan of Adarin cast questioning glances at one another, whispering furiously between themselves but again the answer to the king’s question remains no.

“This is not good dragon king....not good at all.”

Even Er’gan sounded concerned and Midas grunts inwardly in agreement.

“My queen...”

“Yes Adarin.”

“Do you...” Even though he tries to hide it, there is anguish in Adarin’s voice, in the way his head hangs and his shoulders droop.

“...do perhaps think that there is a chance that this dragonkin was the one who killed my only son?”

She exhales shakily but she does not look away and Midas sees compassion flood her face.

She says nothing but she does not need to

Adarin roars, his shoulders quaking with rage and grief.

All that time he had spent, fighting his neighbors, his friends, believing them to be at fault when the whole time, the real enemy sat and dined with him in his own house, under his own roof.

His sadness and his anger, etched into what is left visible of his face from beneath his bushy beard is a sight that is both raw and frightening.

And once again Midas finds himself amazed by the bravery of his little human.

When others would have backed away from the raging dragonkin chief or turned their face away from the sight of such a big man in tears, she simply lays a hand on the arm of the chief, utterly unafraid, comforting him without even saying a word.

Dragonkin and dragon Ryders had plundered and destroyed her home, yet here she is, comforting one of them, her heart genuinely breaking for the clan chief's loss.

Slave or princess, she is beyond perfect.

And Midas knows, he does not deserve her.

Some of the men of Adarin break off running in different directions, no doubt intending to try and search for the man.

"They won't find him."

Her voice is quiet but firm and the king knows that she is right.

It has been many hours since the passing of Adarin's son and the stranger dragonkin, who Midas is beginning to suspect was not actually a dragonkin but some creature using the dark magic of a compelling spell, would have been long gone.

His trail cold as ice.

Still Midas knows he has to try.

"Adarin?"

The man straightens, nods and Midas nods back.

The chief may be heartbroken but dragonkin are warriors and they honored their dead by making sure those who were responsible, paid dearly for it.

"Chief Ryder, captain."

The king beckons the three men to him and they huddle together, trying to come up with a plan.

They speak quietly and quickly, their tones grave and hard.

"Send men to Rardath, we must inform immediately him of the recent events that have come to light, perhaps the same...creature was responsible for both acts and also..."

So absorbed are they in their scheming and the enormity of their task, that no one notices her step to the side.

No one sees her begin to walk away.

Step after step, the distance between them growing.

No sees what she is about to do until it is too late.

"Your highness, the queen! What is she doing?!"

Midas' head spins around, towards the yelling Ryder and when he sees her, the dragon king's heart seems to stop.

"Hera...what do you think you are doing?"

"Finding you answers."

"Hera..."

His voice low, the kind of low that means he is angry or...afraid.

"Hera...I need you to step away from there right this minute and come back here."

She looks back at him. "I have to do this, it is the only way. Trust me"

"Hera No!"

He covers the distance in an instant, his hand reaching out, ready to grab her, to pull her away from the madness she is exhibiting.

But for the first time since the day his dragon awakened in him, Midas is too slow.

His fingers brush against her arm, seeking purchase and finding none, grasping nothing but the air in the place where she once stood.

And in the blink of an eye, she disappears through the door of the hut that had once belonged to Adarin's son, walking straight into whatever trap had been set there for him.

Midas moves to go in after her but his chief Ryder is faster and he stops him with a firm hand on the king's arm.

For the second time that day, Midas bares his teeth at his best friend.

"Let me go Leo."

"I am afraid I cannot do that your highness."

"What in all the realms do you think you are doing?"

"As chief Ryder and right hand to the king it is my duty to protect the king's life with my own... even if it means going against your wishes."

"So you expect me to just leave her in there?"

Leo's jaw works and Midas can see that Chief Ryder is just as worried and unhappy as he is.

"No your highness and by all the gods I would go after her myself but if you go in there you will die."

“I do not care.”

“Well I care. I cannot allow you go in there.”

Midas can feel his rage and worry beginning to simmer and boil, threatening to spill over. “Leo...I will say not say it again...”

The chief Ryder plants his feet and centers his body.

He would not fight the king, would not attack him but he would also not let him pass.

Not unless Midas were to hurt him and hurt him really badly.

Midas does not want to do that but she might be in terrible danger and that is all his mind can focus on right now.

That is all that matters.

Leo sighs, deciding to attempt one last time to reason with him.

“My King, I may not understand what is going on or how she knows those things that she knows, but she has asked you to trust her, can you not do that?”

“Trust her! What if she is hurt or...or...”

“She is not.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because were she to be hurting, you would know and you would not just stand here trading words with me. You would have torn me limb from limb to get to her.”

Midas hates to admit it but Leo is right.

She is not hurt.

He would have known, would have felt it the moment anything happened to her.

He clenches his fist and unclenches them, his eyes remain rimmed with red but he does not draw his sword or attack the man sworn to protect his life.

Midas exhales slowly, forcing himself to slow his heartbeat and stares at his friend.

“You may be right chief Ryder but by the fire gods if anything should happen to her, I will kill you.”

It is not a threat or a promise.

It is simply something that will happen, a statement of fact.

The chief Ryder knows this, understands it.

He does not bat an eyelid. "I know."

The next few moments are the most excruciating of Midas long life.

He has even begun to reconsider his decision to stand out here and is about charge past his second in command and into the hut, traps and his own life be damned.

But then she steps out again.

Both Midas and Leo see her at the same time, both men say her name.

She appears to be in one piece, everything the way it was before she decided to risk herself.

The king reaches for her, his relief at seeing her alive and unhurt temporarily burying his anger at how she had willingly thrown herself into danger.

"Hera, what were you..."

"He was not dragonkin."

Everyone freezes.

The suspicion on all their hearts has finally confirmed by the human girl who should not know all the things she knows and the implications are enormous.

"What was he?"

It is Midas only who remembers to speak, who asks the question they are all thinking, and he knows the answer even before she says it.

"A dark elf."

Ripples travel through all the men present.

A cold chill seems to suddenly hang in the air, raising the hair on the back of their neck and setting their teeth on edge.

"Dark elves!" Adarin, loud and confused.

"What could those shadow worshipping bastards possibly want with Rardath and I?"

"They were sent..."

Midas steps closer to her. "To do what?"

"A distraction...they were to cause a distraction."

The king frowns.

Er'gan is awake and uncomfortable, sending flashes of warning and danger pumping through Midas veins and filling his blood with a heat that echoes the unease rushing through him.

“What distraction, what were they trying to distract us from?”

She is trembling and her eyes are closed as she shakes her head furiously. “I do not know...”

He finally touches her, his hand gripping both her arms, gentle but firm.

“Hera...who sent them?”

She finally looks up at him.

“I am not sure but I felt darkness...an evil so strong it had to be chained down, imprisoned. And were it to ever rise again, it would consume us...all of us.”

“No!”

Midas freezes but it is neither Er'gan's roar in his head nor just her words that turn his blood to ice and set all his sense on fire at the same time.

It is her eyes.

And before she slumps in his arms, he notes that they were no longer blue.

But that before the darkness took her, her eyes had been completely and utterly white.

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HERA

Burning hot yet freezing cold.

That is how I feel all at once.

From the moment I step out of the darkened hut till the moment my legs give way beneath me, I keep quaking and shivering.

I can feel wet beads of sweat rolling down my back yet my body keeps shaking, my teeth chattering.

I want it to stop, because I know it will only make him worry.

I try to make it stop but I am unable to.

My mind is still reeling from all the things I had seen, but my body...my body is exhausted and so she gives up first.

But because I am still conscious, even after I feel my eyes drift close and my knees give out, I can still sense them.

I can hear their startled gasps when I start to fall, can feel his arms surround me in the same instant, catching me and keeping me from crumbling to the floor... can hear his heartbeat when he holds me close, cradling my feeble body to his chest.

I want to open my eyes so that I can tell him that I am okay but my body suddenly feels much too heavy and she refuses to obey me.

My mind is finally getting tired and I am beginning to lose consciousness, their voices start to fade in and out and I have to struggle to keep the sounds separate to understand who is speaking, what they are saying.

“Take her home”

Midas

“And you, my Lord?”

Leo...?

“I cannot return to the castle just yet. I have to remain here, to sort things out.”

There is reluctance in his voice but I barely hear it.

He is sending me away.

I try to protest but nothing comes out. I imagine Leo reaching out, his arms open, ready to take me from the king.

But rather than let me go, I feel Midas’ arms tighten around me, pulling me closer for one infinitely brief moment.

Then he lets go.

“I shall take her and return at once.”

“No...stay with her. I will be able to focus better if I know that you are with her.”

“As you wish my King.”

No...

I try to fight, swimming with all my might against the impending blackness threatening to cloud my mind and suck me in.

Again and again I try to open my eyes and tell him that he does not need to worry, that I wish to stay by his side but I am weaker than I think and the current is stronger than I am.

The last thing I remember is the sensation of being lifted and placed in the arms of someone.

Someone who is not him.

I have never really wondered what happens to a person's mind when they faint, lose consciousness.

Does the mind drift somewhere, into worlds unknown or worlds imagined like it does when we are asleep and dreaming?

Or do we float outside of our bodies, watching things happen yet unable to do anything until it is time or we are ready to go back.

I should know, considering the sheer, almost impressive amount of fainting and near death experiences I have had since the day I was first carried- also unconscious- into the dragon realm.

But I never remember anything.

It just feels like one moment my eyes are open and I am in one place and then I simply blink and when next time I open them, I am in another.

Feeling all at once like no time and all the time in the world has passed.

That is why I have come to the conclusion that when we lose consciousness, for whatever period of time it lasts, I believe we simply cease to exist.

And it is up to the Fates to decide whether to let us blink back into existence or not.

Apparently they must have chosen once again to let me come back.

And for the first time, I am grateful that they did.

Once more, my mind awakens before my body.

And although I am unable to move immediately, I can feel the sun on my face, can smell the blue mountain roses growing outside my window and the silky coolness of the soft sheets that usually line my bed in the castle.

So even without opening my eyes I know that I must be back home and in my room.

It is almost funny how now, when I think of home, it is no longer Averia but the dragon castle that first comes into my head.

Although truth be told, I am getting quite sick of being brought in here unconscious every other day.

That is when I realize that the mattress on my left is dipping slightly to the side

There is someone else in the room, someone sitting beside me and a large, gloved hand, wrapped around mine.

I smile softly and turn up my palm so that I am gripping the hand tighter.

In return I get a squeeze, gentle and firm around my fingers and tiny bubbles of happiness fill my chest.

He must have changed his mind and decided to come back with me.

I swallow, trying to talk but the only thing that comes out is a whimper.

The body sitting beside me moves closer.

“Oh thank the gods, you are awake.”

Relief thickens his voice, making it rough around the edges.

I frown slightly.

I must still be confused because he sounds like...

“Leo?”

He sighs loudly but there is a tiny smile on his lips.

“You look so disappointed your highness. I am almost offended.”

I blink stupidly at his tired handsome face, rough with stubble and at the pale grey eyes that watch me attentively, roaming over every inch of my face, making sure I am okay.

I wet my lips with the tip of my tongue, an attempt to get rid of the woolly dryness in my mouth.

“Where is he?”

As expected, he ignores the question and instead asks one of his own.

“How do you feel?”

I feel exhausted, drained even, but as the seconds pass, I can sense myself getting stronger and I realize they must have made me drink a healing elixir while I was...sleeping.

And by the time I open my mouth to speak again, my voice is thankfully beginning to return back to normal and starting to sound less like I might secretly be a frog.

“Where is he?”

Leo sighs again. “You are not going to let this go are you?”

I simply stare at him in response but he gets the message.

He seems to realize that he is still holding my hand because I notice him glance at our joined fingers but he does not let go.

Instead he strokes the centre of my palm with his thumb, soothing circular motions and I know he is about to say something I will not like.

“He stayed behind.”

I groan in annoyance and move to get up. “I knew it...”

Firm hands on my shoulder push me back down and hold me in place. “What do you think you are doing?”

“We have to go back.”

“No we do not.”

“Yes. We do and stop looking at me like that, like I have somehow grown an extra head in my sleep.”

“Do not take this the wrong way your grace but are you insane?”

I cough slightly. “Kind of difficult not to take that the wrong way Leo.”

“You can barely sit up much less walk and as much as I enjoy holding you I do not think that would be a very wise decision.”

I struggle to rise but it is no use, he is much too strong and something tells me he isn’t even applying any force whatsoever.

“But there could be more traps...he could still be in danger. I need to...”

“Remain here until you can get up without shaking.”

“But...”

“No buts your grace.” His hands remain on my shoulders and he leans in, holding my gaze. “He will be fine.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You are right, I do not. But what I do know is that the king would have me drawn and quartered if I let you leave this room in the state you are in.”

I hate to admit it but I know he is right. I am in no state to be of help to anyone.

Yet it does not stop me from wondering or from worrying.

I fold my arms across my chest which is hard to do not to mention looks ridiculous when you are being pinned down to a bed by a man twice your size with piercing grey eyes and a scar above his right eye.

“Stop pouting.”

“I am not pouting.”

I do not think he believes me.

“Can I at least sit up?”

“Do you promise not to try and run?”

“Why, worried the tiny human might give you the slip?”

He scoffs, a glint of amusement and something else in the way he smirks down at me. “You can try your grace. You would fail but you can try.”

I roll my eyes, resisting the urge to laugh. “Well in that case you have nothing to worry about. Besides you said it yourself, I can barely even walk.”

“Let me help you.”

“I do not need...”

But he does not let me finish.

His hand slips beneath my back silencing my protests and I grab unto his arm to steady and pull myself up.

The action brings my face closer to his and I swear I hear him inhale softly.

But soon I am sitting up and he is moving away, the moment passing so quickly I become sure I imagined it.

I open my mouth to ask something else about Midas but he beats me to it.

“Why did you do it?”

I look away and ask “Why did I do what?” even though I know perfectly well what he is talking about.

“Why did you go in there? You could have died.”

“Oh don’t be so melodramatic Leo. I would not have died. The spell was cast against a dragon Ryder, specifically the king. Perhaps they did not factor in the human slave girl tagging along.”

He considers my words and then frowns. “Still...”

I wave his worries away “Did you really think I would risk my life that way for anyone of you...please. Why are you smiling...stop it.”

But he doesn’t stop. “You’re lying.”

“I am not.”

I am.

When I had realized that I had to go in there, I had my suspicions that the spell that had been cast had been made specifically with a dragon Ryder in mind but I had not been entirely sure.

I had gone in there knowing there was a very strong possibility that I might not make it out alive.

But I have no plans of telling either one of them that.

Leo however keeps looking at me like he might know, his gaze steady and unflinching.

There is something in the way his eyes have darkened slightly that makes it hard for me to hold his gaze and I glance away nervously, pressing my lips together.

“Why are you looking at me that way?”

He frowns slightly, his face unreadable, heavy with an emotion I do not quite understand.

He looks like he might be fighting the urge to do something, the way he swallows hard, his throat bobbing up and down with the force of the motion.

Then after a few moments of uncertain hesitation, he lifts one hand and gently cups my face in his palm, thumb stroking the skin of my cheek.

Once...twice...

“I am glad you are okay.”

Hiding my surprise as best as I can, I bite my lip and offer him a tiny smile.

“Me too Leo...Me too.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 75

HERA

One long heartbeat passes before Leo finally lets go, lowering his hand back to his side.

“You do you know your grace that he is going to be beyond angry that you deliberately put yourself in danger”

“I do.”

But I also do not care. I did what I had to and as long as he comes back unharmed, he can be as angry as he damn well pleased.

The chief Ryder slowly raises his right brow. “You do not seem particularly frightened.”

I simply shrug in response, once again amazed at how easy it is for Leo to read me.

No...the dragon king does not scare me anymore. Not when I have all these other feelings rushing through my mind every time I look at him.

I watch Leo rise from the bed, suddenly not really in the mood to be left by myself with all this thoughts of worry in my head.

“Where are you going?”

“To have the maids bring up something for you to eat.”

“I never said I was hungry.”

He smirks. “You did not have to. The noises your belly is making are about to deafen me.”

I find myself blushing, embarrassed that he had heard and quickly cover it up by glaring at him.

“One of these days Leo, I am going to ask for your head.”

The chief Ryder merely grins. “Ask your husband, he has been trying to do the same thing for decades now.”

My husband...

Well now I am blushing again for a completely different reason.

“You... are not going to lock me in are you?”

Leo stops, turning back to look at me, one hand on the door knob.

“No your highness. Besides, what good would it do? We all know how ‘excellent’ of a lock pick you are.”

The pillow sails across the room but he slides effortlessly out of the way, laughing at me.

“Throwing things is not very queen-like your grace...”

“Oh go fudge yourself Leo.”

I can still hear him laughing even after the door swings shut behind him.

The very moment I am alone again, my mind immediately wanders, once more finding its way back to him.

This entire scenario; on the verge of tears and nearly blind with worry, twisting my fingers, and chewing on my lip until I taste blood, it is all very familiar to me.

Because I have lived it once before.

The day my father died.

It is the waiting that gets to you the most, existing in a limbo of uncertainty, afraid to find out the truth because it might be your worst nightmare, yet unable to bear the thought of not knowing.

It had happened barely three days to my sixteenth moon harvest.

The man I called my father is and was a good man... or at least he tried to be.

And he may not have been perfect but in his own way he had loved us, so very much.

He just loved gambling more.

Said it gave him a thrill nothing else could provide.

He believed himself to be a lucky man and sometimes he would indeed bring home a pouch stuffed full with coins or a fat goose he had won from this person or that person.

But the truth everyone else but my father could see was that he lost so much more than he won.

It was not something we spoke about in the open but it was also not a secret.

Especially not when he began to gamble away things that mattered to our family.

As a family we were all used to my father's excesses; the late nights, the missing heirlooms, the almost manic highs after one of his rare wins.

And by the gods we loved him. As crazy as he was, we loved him.

Because no matter what happened he was always there and he always came back home.

Until the night he didn't.

None of us got any sleep that night.

Somehow we all knew that something terrible had happened to him.

My mother, unable to sit still and too stubborn to listen to reason, had wrapped her shawl around her neck and went out into the dangerous, dark night looking for him.

Leaving me in charge to whispers promises to my worried siblings that I knew, deep inside of me, were nothing but lies.

She did find him but she was too late.

I can still remember hearing the words as if from far away.

My father had bet on our house and lost and then, right there in the tavern, like taking away the roof over our heads was not enough, he had slumped and died of heart attack.

So this feeling of deep seated worry and panic is not in any way new to me.

I hated it then and I hate it even more now.

I am not sure what it means, that I am this concerned about the dragon king but I find myself praying to all the gods that he is okay.

Because I do not know what I would do if he is not.

Henette brings my meal and I eat quickly, barely tasting the food in my mouth, my eyes fixed outside my window; willingly him to come back home.

To come back to me.

Yet the sun goes down, bell after bell ringing out and yet, the king does not return.

I am starting to feel faint with worry and I keep pacing around my room.

It does not matter that it is getting cold, I leave the drapes open so I can know the very moment he returns.

Henette, worried about me, somehow manages to force me into bed but how can I possibly fall asleep when worry for him is all that fills my mind.

But I must have been more tired than I realized because the next thing I know, I am opening my eyes in bed and the sky outside of my open window is a dark velvet almost completely devoid of stars.

From the silence that surrounds me I can tell that it must be the middle of the night already.

My heart is pounding and I am wide awake now, much too nervous to sit still.

Has he still not returned...what if something has indeed happened to him?

“That is it.”

I throw my covers aside and swing my legs off the bed.

I am going to find someone. Leo...some random guard...I do not bloody care.

Someone has to know something and I demand to know what exactly is going on.

I tie a cloak around my neck to ward off the cold and step outside my room, surprised to see that Garwith is not standing outside, guarding my door as usual.

I should be glad that they are no longer worried I might try to escape but I am too confused to take too much notice of it.

I descend barefoot down the curved stone steps and towards the passage that connects my tower with the rest of the castle.

On a whim and for some reason I cannot explain, I find myself heading not into the castle itself but towards the west tower, the room Henette told me Midas has now chosen to stay.

I knock on the door before I can lose my nerve, feeling slightly foolish and not really expecting any reply.

I get none.

And then in a moment of pure madness...

What if he has indeed returned and is with Minth instead?

I shake my head furiously.

No come on Hera that is....absurd?

I try to tell myself that I am being ridiculous but my hands start to shake and hurt blossoms somewhere in my chest.

“Oh come Hera, You are being silly and why do you even care if he is with her and not you?”

I press my fingers into my eyes suddenly afraid.

Afraid to open the door and find out that I am not being silly at all, afraid to find out that I do care, that I care a great deal.

But I cannot stand not knowing so I push the door open, its hinges creaking loudly in the silence of the night and step into the semi-darkened space.

It smells like him.

It is also quite average at first glance.

Not even as big as the one that is supposed to be ours.

So it is not the room itself that causes me to freeze after taking just one step.

He gets up from where he had been sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

“Hera...”

I stand there unable to move, nearly dizzy with relief.

The breath I did not even realize I had been holding leaves my mouth as a startled gasp, and I feel my eyes start to sting.

I press the heel of my hands into my eyes to stop the tears.

But it is not just relief that causes my body to quiver and shake. It is something else...something just as strong.

Anger

“You came back.”

He does not look away but he also makes no move to come towards me. “I did.”

“And you did not think I deserved to know?”

“You were asleep.”

“Skies above I could have been awakened, I was asleep not bloody unconscious.”

“I did not see the point...”

I scoff loudly, my ears refusing to believe what they are hearing.

“I was unable to sit still, I kept looking outside my window, barely able to even eat, worrying about you and you did not see the point...”

He groans, running his hands through his hair.

“Goddamit Hera.”

This is the first time I have ever seen him look like this; ruffled, worried and not in control of his emotions.

And while one part of me wants to go to him, to hold him until he calms down and the lines between his brows disappear, the other part of me is still completely livid.

“Don’t you dare swear at me Midas. What right do you think you have to make me worry like that and not come to see me the moment you got back?”

“I did come, but I did not want to wake you. Leo said...”

“Poppycock...you were avoiding speaking to me...why?”

“It is...complicated.”

“...uncomplicate it.”

Even from this distance, I can see the internal battle going on behind his eyes, can see him struggle to find the words.

“Is it because you are angry at me?”

His lips are pressed so hard together it is almost a thin line.

“You think you were the only one worried? Hera my kingdom was on the verge of a war! Some goddamn dark elf is running loose around my realm casting dark magic spells, stirring up trouble, killing my people and yet half time all I could think about was if you were ever going to wake up again.”

“I did not ask you to worry about me. And why in all the realms are you angry anyway, I saved your life and your precious realm!”

“Because you put yourself in danger!”

“It was my choice goddamit!”

“Exactly!”

“You know what dragon king, never mind. Forget I even came.”

I turn around and reach for the door.

But I barely manage to pull it open before he covers the distance between us and pushes it shut with the flat of his hand.

I glare up at him, my back pinned against the door but he does not move away, caging me in with the largeness of his body.

He stares down at me, his chest heaving.

“I almost lost you today Hera, not once but twice. I have lived a hundred and fifty years and never...”

He pauses, exhales, struggling to hide the emotion that roughens the edges of his voice. “...not once have I ever been as afraid as I was today.”

I stare at a point on his chest, trying hard to ignore the rapid pitter patter of my racing heart.

“You once told me nothing else mattered to you...”

Midas swallows. “I did.”

I look up at him, my breath hitching when I meet his eyes again. “And now...?”

Many heartbeats pass and he says nothing.

He simply stares at me...the both of us breathing heavily.

And then, just when I am about to give up, thinking he does not intend to answer...

He drags my body against his, buries his hand in my hair and slams his lips against mine.

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 76

HERA

Skies above...

This kiss is different, nearly blinding in its intensity.

My heart is pounding in my chest and I can feel my knees growing weak, giving way beneath me but he holds me up, one strong arm wrapped firmly around my waist.

There is a frenzied nature to the way his mouth moves against mine.

An urgency in the way he pulls my bottom lip between his teeth, tasting it with his tongue, making me gasp and moan into his mouth as sensation after sensation of scorching heat travels through my body.

It is almost impossible to think with him kissing me like this, the scent of him, heady and intoxicating.

No one should be allowed to do this.

It feels insane, criminal even, the way he fills my senses and blocks out everything else but the feeling of his mouth on mine.

He kisses me like he is hungry... starving... like I am air and he is a man dying.

Clouding my thoughts and increasing the sudden wetness between my legs until I am afraid the evidence of my desire is about to start running down my thighs.

He wraps my hair around his hand, then he tugs it firmly and when I gasp at the pleasant shock I feel, he slides his tongue in and the taste of him in my mouth, hot and wild and possessive, completely wipes away whatever common sense I have left.

By Zeus this man is going to be my downfall.

And I do not even care.

I wind my arms around his neck, savoring the growling sound he makes low in his throat when I push my body against him.

I bite his lower lip gently and he groans into my mouth.

“Gods Hera...”

A draft of cold night air is blowing in from the open window right across the door but I can barely feel it.

His hands are...everywhere.

Down my arms...over my back...brushing the curve of my breasts...

They travel and explore, refusing to stay still and leaving a trail of burning desire everywhere they touch until every part of me is quite literally set on fire.

I feel utterly vulnerable and incredibly powerful all at once, drowning in the essence that is the dragon king.

And yet it does not feel enough, not even close.

Realizing how close I had come to never seeing him again, never hearing him say my name in that deep, slightly exasperated way...all the worrying and the not knowing...

I need this.

I need him.

His mouth slides away from mine but I pull him back, his deep chuckle becoming a moan when I deepen the kiss even more.

He breaks the kiss again but my murmurs of protest die when I feel what his hands are doing.

Somewhere along the line, my cloak has come loose, falling to a dark puddle at my feet.

He rests his fore head against mine and presses me into the door as both hands trail south, lifting up the folds of my dress.

“Hera...”

His breath feels hot on the side of my neck.

He kisses me there, biting gently then sucking on the skin; pain and pleasure melting into one until my brain feels nearly blank from the sheer madness of it all.

How is this even possible?

My mouth parts in a soundless gasp when I feel his hands, rough and callused and large, slip beneath my dress, running up the sides of my thighs to cup my cheeks, squeezing the roundness between his fingers.

“Heavens knows I tried so hard to stay away from you...”

Tiny, butterfly like kisses in the hollow of my neck... along my collar bone.

“Why...”

Breathless...needy...whoever this new Hera is, she sounds nothing like me.

“...Why...did you want to stay away from me...?”

He smirks, placing a kiss on my jaw.

“You mean a reason besides the fact that you stole your way into my realm?”

I roll my eyes and slap at his arm, loving the way his chuckle, deep and rumbling sounds when his lips are pressed against my skin.

“Tell me...”

“Because you were a distraction...an impossibly beautiful one...but a distraction none the less.”

I bite my lips to stop from smiling foolishly.

“And now, do I no longer distract you?”

“A distraction...no, not anymore.”

He raises his head and his eyes when they meet mine are so dark they are barely even gold.

“Now you are dangerously close to becoming an addiction. I can’t concentrate on work because I am too busy thinking about you...”

One hand slides around my waist, anchoring me to the firmness of his body.

“...I try to sleep and I am unable to because I am too busy wanting you...”

His other hand slides down between us, dropping another inch with each word until he is circling the heat of my wetness through the thin cloth of my undergarments, barely touching me yet making me shudder and gasp all the same.

“...You consume my every waking moment Hera and when I do manage to fall asleep, you plague my dreams so that I wake up craving you, needing the taste of you in my mouth...needing to breathe in your scent and hear your voice.”

My eyes drift close when his hand slips beneath the band of my shorts and move over the curls of my mound to disappear in the softness between my legs.

“Midas...” I am panting now, shamelessly pressing my centre against his hand.

He leans in, places his mouth against my ear.

“You drive me insane Hera and the worst part of it all...is how badly I never want you to stop.”

My heart flutters and soars, a bird in flight.

But then his finger glides against the swollen button of my clit and all else falls away, fading.

Everything around me, my entire being seems to have been reduced to that one single sensitive point and I forget how to even breathe.

He flicks it...then rubs up and down against it and like ice beneath the burning heat of the sun, I can feel myself melting around his fingers, unable to resist, unable to do anything but give in.

He slides one finger in.

“Oh dear Zeus...”

I grab desperately at his arm, my nails digging into his skin, trying to keep from drowning.

His assault is relentless, unyielding.

He turns his palm up so that his thumb is still stroking my clit even as he slides in another finger, filling me...stretching me out.

I can barely feel my toes touching the floor but it does not matter.

He is holding me up effortlessly even as my hips buck and I twist and writhe against his hand, straining against the fingers invading my core, even as they start to slide faster and faster in and out of me.

Then he curls them inside of me and I nearly scream at the shock of blinding pleasure that races through me.

Madness...that is what this is...pure, utter, delicious madness.

Each pump of his hand is asking me to give in and I can feel my walls tightening around his fingers.

Can feel myself getting dangerously closer and closer to falling apart completely.

“Midas...Please...”

I am not even sure what I am begging for.

And through it all he watches me, eyes dark and unreadable, even as his fingers work faster...his thumb stroking feverishly at my clit.

He slides in a third finger.

“Oh my f*****g god...Midas!”

He groans, a tiny smirk tugging at the corners of his beautiful mouth “f**k I love it when I can make you swear...”

This is it....I can't...there is no...gods above...

But just as I am about to tip over and explode, his fingers slide completely out of me and he pulls his hand away.

It is like a shock, being knocked so violently back to reality and I am left gasping and shivering and very incredibly unsatisfied.

This time I am the one who growls and I start to murmur a complaint or a threat...in this state I can't be sure...but he kisses me, stealing the words from my swollen lips.

Then he pulls back slightly to meet my eyes and whispers into the heated, non-existent space between us.

“Not yet.”

And the way he looks at me...gods.

If wanting someone more than you need to breathe is a dangerous path to tow...

Then skies help me, because if that is the case, I am in a lot of trouble

And I can barely bring myself to even care.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 77

MIDAS

This is new...

The fierceness of the feelings surging through him.

New and unexpected and thrilling.

So much so that he is unsure whether to be worried or elated.

Midas knows he can be ruthless, his logic cold and harsh.

It is the way he has to be.

All the people who look to him for protection, the lands and clans beneath his care, he is responsible for too much.

And one did not last on the dragon throne or protect the much coveted 5th realm by being lenient or having weaknesses that can easily be exploited.

He has always known, had been taught from the days before he could even mount a horse without assistance, that as dragon king he could never give into his emotions.

No matter how much he desires to.

As a result, except for the brief period of rebellion in his youth, he is never reckless, never impulsive.

He favors carefully thought out plans over spontaneity.

And if there is even the slightest of possibilities that something could result in dangerous, unstable consequences beyond his control, Midas either kills it or stays far... far away from it.

He does not pull them into his arms and kiss them until they are a trembling mass of incoherent want and he is half insane with lust.

Yet when it comes to her everything Midas knows, has ever known, suddenly seems to become of little importance.

When he is around her, this human that somehow manages to take his breath away, caution, control...everything he prides himself in flies out the window, tossed out on their back like discarded pieces of paper.

It should unnerve him, how easy it is for her to break down his walls and get to him in places he did not think possible.

But instead he finds himself craving more and more of the effect she has on him because it allows him to forget.

At least for a while.

He is not just the dragon king, ruler of the 5th realm when he is with her.

And while this confuses him, leaves him feeling bewildered and unsure because Midas does not know how to be anything else, it also feels strangely freeing.

And freedom as it turns out, is extremely addictive.

Even his emotions feel different when it comes to her...stronger somehow.

Anger...need...lust...

His desire to both protect and possess her consuming him with a white heat that all at once is both frightening and intoxicating.

And Midas is unsure about what it all means.

So he simply gives in.

Kissing her again and again, unable to stop.

Teasing her with his mouth and his hands and watching the way her eyes darken with each fleeting touch, each deliberate caress.

He almost finds it impossible to believe how close he had come to never being able to do this again.

Or that...

Or this...

Her pants of arousal into the still warm air between them are the most beautiful sounds Midas has ever heard and he finds himself wondering, exploring exactly how he can make them come faster.

Perhaps it is the bond.

Perhaps it is because she is the other half of his soul.

That would explain why everything felt more intense when it was her, why the scent of her filled his nose and clouded out every other thing.

But Midas suspects, even though it makes no sense, that even if she were not his tether, he would still feel this strongly about her.

Human or not.

He would still be immensely fascinated by the silky fire of her hair, lush and red when he runs his hands through it, watching it slip between his fingers...

By the steel blue of her eyes that were capable of flashing with both defiance and compassion...

And by her partial insanity and how strong she is even after everything she has been through.

Everything he has indirectly had a hand, many hands, in putting her through.

This is also why Midas has tried so hard to keep his distance.

Not because he is not attracted to her because by all the gods he is.

But because he knows he does not deserve to have her as his.

Yet knowing he should not is not enough to stop him from thinking about the way she says his name when she is turned on.

Does not stop him from obsessing about the way her center had tasted in his mouth on the night of their binding ceremony, hot and soft and dripping wet.

For her own good Midas realizes he should stop now.

He should back away from her and send her gently back to bed before he completely loses himself in her.

But she moans and presses up against him and immediately he knows that he would not be able to.

Not even in a thousand years.

And now that he has her here, with him, he has no plans of letting her go again.

Caution and doing the right thing be damned.

For the first time in his many years as king, he does not want to hold back...not anymore.

And if making love to her is insanity, then Midas was just going to have to run mad.

"Midas..."

f*****g hell

Just one single breathless word, that is all it takes to make him as hard as a rock and he has to struggle to keep from taking her right here, against the door of the room in the west tower.

He needs to feel her skin against his but this...dress of hers is getting in the way.

So he spins her around so that her front is towards the door and her back is to him.

He intended to be civil about it, taking off her dress slowly but then she pushes that round pert bottom of hers against the bulge straining in his pants, rubbing herself along its length and he gives up immediately, a low growl in the base of his throat.

And one loud rip and a startled squeal later, all the tiny round buttons are scattered on the floor and her ruined dress droops off both sides of her shoulders.

“You know your highness that was one of my favorite dresses.”

He pushes it all the way off, letting it fall to the ground in a puddle at her feet.

“Was it now?”

“It was”

He steps even closer, running his hands down her sides, following her dips and curves.

“Then let me make it up to you.”

She exhales, shaky and shallow.

“What makes you think you can?”

“Lie to me all you want Hera...”

His palms slide back up, grazing the curves of her breasts and the hardness of her n****s to wrap gently around her neck, smirking when she sighs and leans into him. “...Your body knows perfectly well what it wants.”

Midas tilts her head to the side and then he lowers his mouth to her neck.

Kissing and sucking at the skin.

Marking her.

Her reaction to his kiss only serves to send even more blood rushing to his already swollen c**k.

He turns her around so she is facing him again and when he sees her, his breath catches in his throat.

His eyes take in the sight of her.

The swell of her breasts... the smattering of freckles across her chest...the way her hips dip slightly before flaring out...

By all the realms she is beautiful.

Beautiful and utterly tempting.

He wants to run his tongue, his hands, his teeth across every inch of her.

“Gods above Hera...”

His voice is rougher than it was before and she blushes, suddenly self conscious beneath his ravenous gaze.

She lifts her arms, in an attempt to cover her chest but he pulls her hands away.

Gruff and commanding. "Don't you dare."

He could stare at her all day, all night and every moment in between for the rest of his life and it would still never be enough.

He cups one perfect, smooth mound in his hand, thumb rubbing against the hardened n****e.

"Tell me what you want."

But she merely moans in response so he tugs at it, pinching it gently and rolling it until her eyes flutter close and her mouth falls open in a silent gasp.

"I want an answer Hera..."

She swallows, visibly struggling to find her voice but then she meets his eyes and his world stops.
"You. I want you."

"Good girl."

He scopes her in his arms, cutting across the room before she can even blink and promptly tosses her unto the bed.

He straddles her with one knee between her legs then he holds her hand above her head, pinning it to the bed.

"You are not allowed to bring them down unless I ask you to."

And then before she can respond, he dips his head to her chest and takes the round, hardened button of her left n****e into the warmth of his mouth.

"Skies... Midas..."

His second hand covers the other, kneading and squeezing, moving from one to the other until she is shivering and writhing beneath him.

He feels her hands in his hair, pulling him closer and he looks up at her, her n****e still in his mouth.

She gazes down at him with eyes half-lidded, moaning when they lock eyes and she sees...and feels his tongue making circles around her sensitive buds.

He waits till her eyes fall fully shut in silent ecstasy... then he pulls away.

"Tsk I told you not to bring your hands down"

She sighs. "It is hard to remember when you keep doing...that"

"Shall I tie your hands to the bed so you do not forget?"

Her eyes go wide.

Not with fear but with excitement, her pulse quickening in her throat.

He c***s his head slightly and his eyebrows tilt upwards.

"You would like that wouldn't you?"

She does not answer.

She does not need to.

gods could she be anymore perfect?

He smirks. "You surprise me human."

"And you dragon king, talk way too much."

And then she drags him back towards her and kisses the laughter from his mouth.

He breaks the kiss and moves downwards.

A trail of tiny kisses until he finally gets to his destination and takes her in his mouth.

He tells himself that he simply wishes to give her pleasure.

But the truth is since the moment he slid his fingers into her core, he has been dying to taste her again.

He was going to tease her, draw it out as punishment for her bringing her hands down but the moment his mouth touches her...

By f*****g goddamn Hades...

Curses and words of blasphemy that would no doubts damn his soul to the underworld streak through his mind and desire unlike anything he has ever known before rushes through Midas with so much force that he almost loses himself completely.

He parts her folds with his fingers and flicks at her already sensitive clit with his tongue.

She tastes even better than he remembers and he laps at her greedily.

Sucking and licking, selfishly satisfying his hunger until she begins to quiver and shake.

Her breathing gets faster and more erratic as she gets closer to coming in his mouth.

“Midas...you have to stop...I can't...”

But he ignores her, gripping her a*s and holding her tighter so that she is unable to move away from his relentless assault.

Her hips tilt off the bed as she rides against his mouth, chasing after her o****m.

Midas knows the very moment she finds it, the way it rips through her with a force that lifts her halfway up the bed, legs trembling and bucking.

And he laps up every last drop, drawing it out, drowning her in wave after wave of relentless pleasure.

Much...much later, after a lot more of giving in and losing themselves in each other, he holds her against him and she lies in his arm breathing quietly, immensely satisfied and utterly spent.

He realizes that he is not just satisfied.

He is happy.

And it has been a long... long time, since the ruler of the 5th realm has been well and truly happy.

Midas did not intend to ever fall for anyone.

He still is not entirely convinced or even completely comfortable with the idea.

But it appears to be happening anyway.

With or without his consent.

And the dragon king is utterly powerless to stop it.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 78

HERA

The first thing I hear is his heart.

The deep rumbling of it, beating quietly beside my ear and I frown.

Not because it is bad, but because it is too good to be true.

It is in no way as loud as the sound of the morning bell ringing somewhere outside the castle.

Or as jarring as the bright sunlight streaming in from the window and falling on the side of my face.

But somehow it is more there...more real than any of the other sounds around me.

And for that reason alone, I conclude that I must be dreaming.

That is the only thing that makes sense.

Because it did not matter what had happened the night before, when the moon and stars were our only witness, the dragon king is always gone before I can even open my eyes.

And I always wake up alone.

It stung...still did, but I am learning to get used to it.

It is like my grandmother would sometimes say, expect disappointment and you would not be disappointed.

So even as I shift closer, my eyes still closed, I tell myself that it cannot be real.

The heat of his body radiating off my skin, the comforting scent of him like man and warmth filling my nose...

Nothing but a dream.

A dream my half-insane, possibly obsessed brain, has perhaps conjured up as an after effect of what had turned out to be the most explosive, life-altering night of my life.

A dream I have absolutely no desire to wake up from.

But then I feel his arm tighten around me and my heart skips a beat.

Skies...could it be?

I tilt my chin up and open one eye cautiously, then the other.

Peering out from beneath half-lidded eyes so that should it turn out to be a dream, I can close them quickly again before I lose it.

And when I do look, I nearly gasp.

For as it turns out, it is in fact not a dream at all.

Pinching the skin of my arm does not make him disappear.

Neither does lifting one finger to poke at his face.

He stirs when I touch him but he does not awaken.

He stayed.

He actually stayed.

Warmth and happiness blossoms from somewhere in the centre of my chest, making my toes curl and causing me to feel lightheaded and giddy.

So much so that I have to press my fingers to my mouth to stifle the bubble of laughter that threatens to escape.

I know the more than likely reason for his continued presence here, lying in the same bed, beside me is that that he overslept and is not yet conscious that it is morning.

But I tell myself that the reason he is still here is because he wants to be.

That for once, he wanted to wake up with me in his arms.

My heart likes that answer better.

He is breathing quietly.

The rhythmic, even rise and fall of his chest telling me he is still asleep.

And I stare up at him, shifting closer while holding my breath so I do not wake him, finally able to for the first time, look at him when he does not have his defenses up.

When he is neither arguing nor angry or upset with something I have done.

And he looks...different.

I mean structure wise, everything is the same.

He still has those impressively long lashes that cast shadows over his cheeks and are those...freckles across his nose?

How in all the realms have I never seen those before?

Watching him like this has me feeling both silly and incredibly happy all at the same time.

He looks so peaceful, vulnerable even, and it is almost like his walls are down and I can see the real him.

The one he hides behind his frown and scowls and expressionless gazes.

Right now he is neither the dragon king nor the immortal ruler of the 5th realm.

He is Midas...just Midas.

And how in all the realms is he so beautiful?

The tips of my fingers, no longer satisfied with my merely looking, begin to itch and tingle and I have to fold my hands in fists to stop from tracing the chiseled outline of his jaw that is already covered in prickly morning stubble.

His lips part slightly and my eyes drop to his mouth.

A mouth that last night had done the most incredible, unspeakable things to my body.

Things I am very sure were decidedly criminal and deliciously sinful.

Just thinking about it, remembering it all, is enough to make me turn the same scarlet as the velvet draping hanging from the bed.

Yet the more I think about last night, the faster I find myself losing the internal battle not to touch him.

Without even being conscious of it, my finger tips are tracing circles and paths up the smooth hardness of his chest.

Again he stirs slightly and I jerk my hands back, cheek flaming yet ready to deny everything.

But again he does not open his eyes.

Oh damn it all to flipping Hades.

And before I can stop myself or think properly about it, I place my palms firmly against his chest and stretch up to press my lips softly against his mouth.

But before I can pull away his lips are moving against mine, deepening the kiss.

His arms wrap around my middle, pulling me suddenly on top of him and I let out a startled, muffled sound, my eyes widening in surprise.

He breaks the kiss and smirks up at me.

“And a good morning to you as well.”

“M...Midas...”

“So for exactly how long were you planning on taking advantage of me while I was asleep?”

I try to glare at him but my lips refuse to stop trying to stretch into a smile.

“Liar. You have been awake this whole time haven’t you?”

He shakes his head. “I have not and now I shall have to punish you for daring to wake me.”

I smirk at him. “How...?”

Both his hands slide up the curve of my bottom and up my back, slowly pulling me back towards him even as he pretends to think.

Our lips meet for the second time.

There is nothing soft anymore about the way he kisses me, or about the way his body feels beneath my hands.

What's more, I can feel him starting to grow even harder than he had been merely moments ago and I gasp when the evidence of his very apparent, very naked arousal presses against my equally bare center.

But before I can forget myself, he flips me over.

"Ah! Midas!!..."

I scream his name in between fits of laughter, thrashing around in an effort to escape.

"Midas....stop it...this is hardly proper."

But he ignores me and continues to tickle my sides until I am laughing so hard, I am in danger of wetting myself.

"Midas...please...everyone is going to hear!"

A smirk that is almost a smile lights up his beautiful face. "You did not seem to care about being quiet last night."

I can feel myself blush all the way to my toes and hair tips.

Skies above... he is right.

The way I had screamed and moaned, surely at the very least half the castle had to have heard me.

I groan. "Oh gods...I am never going to be able to leave this room again am I?"

He chuckles, dark and deep and rough and all shades of arousal rush through me.

Somewhere along the line, his tickling has slowed down to become caresses and his thumbs brush firmly against both n****s.

"It does not matter. The longer you stay here, the more chances I have to make you scream."

And just like that I am wet again.

Wet and very thoroughly turned on.

Oh skies above get a grip Hera...

But even as I say the words in my head, I find myself reaching up to kiss him again.

He meets me halfway, growling slightly when my hands, greedy little things with a mind of their own, wrap around the length of him, guiding the tip slowly towards my dripping center.

“Hera...”

It is a powerful feeling, knowing that I can do this to him.

I almost cannot believe how bold I am being and it does not matter that my legs still ache from last night.

I want him again.

Now.

He slips inside me, our bodies fitting together like pieces of an admittedly strange puzzle and every other thing else fizzles out.

Fizzles and pops and takes my breath away along with it.

His arm snakes around me and he flips us around again so that I am now straddling him.

And with both hands firmly gripping my waist, he lets me ride him, helping me along his length.

I have never done this before.

But instinct is a powerful thing and so I let go, allowing my body take what she wants.

He watches me the entire time, murmuring dark words of encouragement and blasphemy all in the same breath, our eyes meeting and holding as I bounce and arch and roll my hips against him.

And the sound of his voice guides me over the ledge, sending me falling head first into the throes of another blinding o****m.

Every time feels the first time all over again.

Except it gets stronger, each o****m he gives me more intense than the one before it.

He holds me up, lifting himself on one forearm and thrusting into me, drawing out my pleasure for as long as he can.

I can feel my walls clench and spasm, squeezing his c**k and taking him down along with me.

He comes hard, his head falling into the crook of my shoulder even as his seed, warm and wet spills inside of me, dripping out and flowing between my thighs.

I wrap my arms around him, unable to move.

And for a long time, we remain like that, breathing heavily, sweaty bodies wrapped up in each other.

He pulls away slightly and places a gentle kiss on my forehead.

“By Hades Hera...you are going to be the end of me.”

I say nothing, still not trusting myself to speak but a smile tugs on my lips.

“Just promise me one thing.”

I meet his eyes, already wanting to kiss him again. “What is that?”

He brushes a strand of hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ears.

“What you did yesterday, going into that hut and risking your life like that. Promise me you are never going to do that again.”

I bite my lip.

“I can’t.”

“Hera...”

I cup his face between my hands.

“Midas, No. If I cannot use this....gift, whatever it is to help the people I care about then of what use is my having it?”

“But, to have you deliberately put yourself in danger like that. I cannot...”

I kiss him gently, cutting off the words.

“I already lost my family once before. I am not losing you too.”

Then realizing what I have just unknowingly admitted out loud, I quickly smirk.

“Besides...I can’t exactly let you die before I even have a chance to kill you myself.”

He is silent for a moment, thinking.

But then the corner of his lips tilt upwards.

“You care about me.”

Drats...

Frowning, I attempt to look away.

“I can’t remember saying that.”

I try to get up but his arms around me do not budge.

“No, but you implied it.”

“Assumptions are dangerous your grace. You should not make a habit of it.”

He laughs.

I wonder if he knows that his eyes quite literally glow when he does that.

He is staring at me again and because I am unable to help it I blush.

“Why are you looking at me like that, is there something on my face?”

“No, I simply enjoy looking at you. It is...fascinating”

Anymore and my skin is going to be stained a permanent red color.

“Have I ever told you how much I like your hair?”

I shake my head, blushing again. “I used to hate it.”

A frown, one single line between the brows of his perfect face.

“Why in all the realms?”

“Because no one in my family had hair that looked like mine.”

Midas eyes become instantly alert, not by much but enough that I notice the difference.

“What do you mean?”

I shrug. “No one in the whole of Averia did. I would walk down the streets and babies would point at me and my ‘strange’ hair”

“Did it not bother you?”

“Not exactly. The people who mattered to me never treated me any differently. Although when I was being stubborn my mother used to say I had been exchanged as a baby and her real, more obedient daughter got taken away and she got me instead.”

I chuckle lightly as I remember but the dragon king frowns even harder.

“Why would she say that?”

“Oh it was nothing.”

“Tell me.”

I am frowning now as well, wondering why this is suddenly so important. But I tell him anyway.

“My hair was brown at birth...”

“But?”

“but then the next morning when my parents awoke, it had turned a bright flaming orange...and no one knew why.”

The Dragon King’s Substitute Bride Chapter 79

HERA

“So what you mean to tell me is that your hair just changed into a different color overnight?”

“Yes.”

“And no one thought that was... strange?”

I frown.

“I mean they did, but what were they expected to do, throw me out a day after my birth? And why does knowing this bother you so?”

He is not looking at me but I can almost see the wheels spinning and turning around in his head.

“Because it may be important, perhaps even a clue...”

I shiver, suddenly cold and now aware of how naked I still am. “A clue...to what?”

But rather than answer Midas gently lifts me off of him and gets up, heading to the ornate gold and silver dresser that sits just opposite the side of the bed we are on.

“A clue to what Midas?”

I repeat my question to his back trying not to let myself be distract by how impossibly good he looks.

He turns around, but again, he does not answer my question.

Instead he holds out something to me, something white and cotton-like.

“Here, put this on.”

I am about to ask him why he is making me wear his shirt.

Then I remember that my dress is lying in a ruined mess at the feet of his door and I have nothing else to wear.

I slip the tunic easily over my head and pass my arms through it, letting it drop to where it ends somewhere past mid thigh.

It smells like him and as expected, my hands have completely disappeared

and the neck is so wide, it hangs off one shoulder.

It is hideously large on me that I could cut it up and sew another dress with the extra material left.

But I barely even notice, my eyes are fixed on him, steady, my mind however is a mess.

“You have yet to answer my question.”

Leaning against the dresser he folds his arms and crosses his ankles.

“Hera, what you are able to do...it is impossible.”

What in all the realms is he talking about?

I struggle to make sense of the words, frowning so hard that my eyebrows begin to hurt.

“I admit it is strange but impossible...surely that cannot be true. How impossible can it be if I am able to do it?”

“The ability to see the future is magic Hera. Very...very strong, 7th realm magic.”

I am trying not to show my fear but I do believe I am doing a very good job of it.

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry.

“The 7th realm...isn’t that...”

“The realm of the gods yes. And your hair changing color the night of your birth, that is an indication that your powers, you were born with them. You were born with magic.”

I can sense that there is more.

Something else.

Something that could shatter everything I ever known.

I am almost afraid to ask.

A part of my brain is screaming for him to stop speaking, to let things remain as they are.

But somehow I also know that it matters little whether he says the words out loud or not.

From the very first moment I had step foot into his realm, everything had already begun to change.

I look up at him to find him watching me, gauging my reaction to his words.

So I push down my trepidation as far behind my eyes as I can and get up slowly, wringing my hands, twisting them this way and that way.

“So what does that mean?”

He holds my gaze, his own unflinching.

“Humans are never born with magic Hera.”

Time stops and everything seems to slow down, sounds, sight even my heart.

No...no...this cannot be happening.

“So what in all the realms does that mean? I am human for crying out loud...I am!”

I stop suddenly, my blood turning to ice, jagged ice that pokes and tears at my veins.

My voice quietens...lowers as I look up at him.

“I am human...right?”

He does not answer.

“Midas...”

I am trying so hard to be strong but my voice cracks and I start to feel light headed, faint even and it takes all my will power to stop from crumbling to the floor.

My will power and his arms that are suddenly around me, lowering me back to the bed, pulling me to his chest.

“I do think you are human. If you were anything else I would have known.”

My hands are gripping the edge of the bed so tightly that my fingers actually start to hurt.

“Then why...why is my hair the color that it is, why do I have this... power inside of me if it as you say and human are not supposed to possess magic?”

He sighs and says the words like they are heavy, words he is unused to and does not like saying.

“I do not know.”

“Oh Gods above...”

Before I can dissolve into a full blown panic attack he turns me back to him so I am looking at him again.

His hands are warm and callused on both sides of my face and he uses his thumb to swipe at the tear that threatens to roll down my cheeks.

“What I do know Hera is that you are mine and no matter what happens I always...always protect what’s mine.”

His...he called me his...

Said it in that serious, brooding way he says everything and I can feel my heart start to beat again, accepting the words, letting the solid warmth of it invade every part of me.

Then just as quickly, it is followed by a sinking feeling and where it comes from I am unsure but the words are slipping out before I can stop them.

“But what if the one who needs protection is you...from me?”

But he does not even bat an eyelid.

Instead he leans forward and touches the tip of his nose to me.

“Then I am just going to have to cross that bridge when I get to it.”

But I am unsatisfied with how calm he is being.

“Are you not worried I might be some sort of oddity? What if I am a witch or even worse what if my parents are not actually my parents and I am some strange hybrid cross between a giant and some human... fairy person?”

“Witches are human Hera, they just aren’t born with their skills and I am no expert but I believe you would be a lot taller if you had giant blood in you.”

“I am serious Midas.”

“So am I.”

“But it makes no sense.”

I do not even realize that I have gotten up from the bed.

That I am now, even at this moment pacing around the king’s room with my hands in my hair, then at my sides, clenching them in fists so tight I can feel my nails press into my palms hard enough to break the skin.

“ You say humans do not have magic, are not born with it and yet here I am walking around with a flaming carrot top head, having dreams and knowing things I am not supposed to know. How is this even happening, what does it mean? Am I dangerous, should you be afraid of me...should I be afraid of me? What if I...”

He kisses me softly. Once...twice...a third time.

Until I stop trying to speak and start breathing again.

I did not even see him get up.

He lifts my right hand to his lips and kisses the inside of my wrist, feather soft over my racing pulse.

“On the ride to Adarin, you said you trusted me.”

“I did.”

“And now, do you still trust me?”

“I do.”

Call me insane for trusting the man who’s Ryders burned down my village but I do.

I am unsure why, I do not even know when it happened.

It just did.

He tucks my hair behind my ears.

“Then trust me when I tell you we will figure it out and that you have nothing to be afraid. Not only are you queen of the 5th realm, but you have me now and you always will.”

I simply nod, unable to say anything more.

My throat suddenly feels choked up and I am brimming with emotions I am not entirely sure about or even ready to admit out loud.

But I am beginning to realize that when I am with him, I do not always need words.

He smiles softly. “Now stop pouting. It makes me want to kiss you and I will never be able to leave this room if you don’t.

So naturally, I fold my arms across my chest and pout even harder.

But before it can work, the servants are at the door, knocking loudly.

Turns out the king not sending for them or showing up out of his room at the fourth bell, sends the chief steward into a panic attack where he is convinced that the king has somehow been attacked in his sleep.

I catch a few side eyed, surprised glances when the servants see me in the king's room but Midas is here and they dare not say anything.

I pretend not to watch him dress and prepare.

My cheeks turning redder with each passing moment, my mind shifting between lust and need.

How can I miss him so much already when he is yet to even leave?

He catches me staring and tells me not to look at him that way.

I put on my best innocent face and ask him what way?

He says I know what he means and I in turn tell him I am not a mind reader and that if he is always so vague, his subjects will have a hard time understanding him.

He laughs.

But he does not stop dressing.

So I swallow my pride and blurt out the words before common sense can prevail.

"Stay with me."

That stops him and he turns to look at me, his hands sending the swords sliding silently into their sheaths behind his back.

He walks up to where I am, sits on the edge of the bed and pull me into his lap.

I am being incredibly selfish.

I do not care.

He sighs. "You know I want to stay."

"Then stay."

"You also know that I cannot do that. Adarin and Rardath...this dark elf business, I need to sort it out and no...I cannot let you come with me. Not until I know what we are dealing with."

"What use is it being king if you cannot do what you want?"

The corner of his mouth tilts up in the ghost of a smile.

"I am forever asking myself that exact question. Perhaps I should have been born a stable hand instead."

I laugh. "You would make a terrible stable hand."

"How dare you?" He appears insulted but his eyes are smiling.

"Hera..."

"Yes my Lord?"

"You do know that it does not change who you are right?"

I freeze and sigh.

So he can see through my act.

Can tell that I am still very much shaken up inside by everything that is happening.

"How can you say that when we do not even know who I am...or what I am?"

He tilts my chin and stares hard at me, making me unable to tear my eyes away.

"You are you Hera. The human who risked her life and left everything behind to save her realm even though it had been nothing but cold and harsh to you.

Someone who would albeit foolishly, run head first into danger to save people who do not even deserve it, simply because it is the right thing to do. And this gift...if it is that, it does not define you and it most definitely does not change who you are."

My heart feels so full it is about to burst and I am unsure what to do.

How to react.

So I do the next best thing.

The one thing I am good at.

I push my feelings down and smirk at him.

"So you admit that marrying you is a risk to my life?"

He scoffs "That...out of everything I said, that is all you decided to take?"

"What, it is important. For future reference."

I am rewarded when he laughs

"By Hades am I glad I got you instead."

Then he kisses me. Hard and long

And before I can recover from that, the dragon king is gone.

Leaving me to sort out my tangled up emotions and the insane fact that I might not be so human after all.

The Dragon King's Substitute Bride Chapter 80

HERA

A fortnight...

Two whole weeks....

Fourteen days and fourteen nights.

That is how long it has been since I last saw Midas.

And as it turn out it matters little whether it is fourteen days or an entire life time, they all feel the exact same way when you spend them missing someone.

If one had taken a peek into my future and told me that I would spend my mornings constantly looking outside my window, waiting for the dragon King I would have called them insane and probably spat at their feet for good measure.

But every morning I wake up, it is the first thing I do.

And when I find out he has not returned in my sleep, I am forced to spend the rest of the day trying to pretend that I am not thinking about him.

It helps that my days are now no longer as free as they used to be.

In fact they have gotten quite busy on a few occasions.

What with my lessons in the dragon tongue and the ways of the realm,

meetings with the chief stewards and some of the head servants to learn and participate in the running of the castle,

and with both Midas and Leo gone, I have even been summoned a few times to sit in on council meetings.

Honest to the gods I do not see how Midas has managed to do this for the amount of time that he has.

I cannot say for certain that the dragon castle and its inhabitants are beginning to warm up to me, but it certainly does appear that they seem to hate me a little less.

Henette tells me that it is because they had expected me to push back.

To perhaps report to the king or use my position as queen to punish them, given them a reason to really hate me.

And that my refusal to do anything more than show a genuine fascination with their realm and learning about them is beginning to prick at their consciousness.

I almost laugh.

Good for them that they decided to stop when they did because I had honestly been one day away from having someone sent to the dungeon.

She also tells me that it had been Minth's idea all long.

Somehow, I had already suspected that.

If I had thought the King's mistress merely disliked me before, then I was being naïve.

She hates me.

Word must have somehow gotten to her about my presence in the king's room on the day of his departure.

I personally prefer to think she had heard my screams and moans.

But somehow since she found out that the king and I perhaps no longer hated each other as much as before, she has been the absolute bane of my existence.

The worst part of it all is how well she hides it.

Choosing subtle and cunning words, making me feel foolish or inadequate in front of the court, humiliating me whenever I am trying to do anything in the presence of any of the other members of the castle.

The gods know that I try to ignore her.

To act completely uninterested in whatever game she is playing.

But it is getting harder and harder not to sock her in her beguiling angelic face and pull out all her hair and perhaps an eye too for good measure.

But I suspect that is what she wants me to do.

My place in the dragon's castle is too shaky.

No one trusts me yet and each day feels like walking on thin ice while knowing it could always crack any minute.

The crown on my head and the fact that I am wife to the dragon King are more than likely the only reasons why they treat me with any form of respect.

But if I were ever to stoop to hair pulling and eye punching cat fights, I would no doubt lose that as well.

No matter how much the other person may have deserved it.

However, long days and Minth's antics aside, I am actually beginning to get used to life in the dragon realm.

My favorite days are the ones where I get to go into the capital.

Fine 'get to' is not actually being honest.

It is more along the lines of the days where I tell the steward and my guards that I am going out, then they try to stop me because they are afraid of Midas and then I tell them politely of course, to kindly get lost and out of my way.

Which of course means they always insist on following me.

But even that is slowly becoming bearable.

The dragonkin outside the castle are much less antagonistic than those who live within the stone walls high on dragon's mount.

I, of course still get a few side eye, evil glances but I would like to think that the dragonkin of the capital are slowly beginning to accept me, maybe not as their queen but at the very least as some sort of fixture in their lives.

And on some days...

On some days, I can even dare to be happy.

That is until the guilt creeps in and I start to think about everything I left behind.

About my brother.

I can only hope that the king of Averia kept his word to take care of him.

Because no matter how hard I try, I am finding myself beginning to think less and less of Averia.

My days and nights filled instead with thoughts of the dragon realm and its inhabitants.

And about their King who as of this morning had still not returned.

I miss him.

I miss him so badly that it actually aches.

And I am beginning to get sick with worry.

I keep asking if there has been any word but no one seems to have heard anything.

That or they do not wish to tell me.

Neither one sits right with me and on some nights, I fall asleep sitting by my window.

Praying to all the gods that he is safe and willing him to come back home...to come back to me.

The bell rings out for the eleventh time this night and I look up from the book I am reading.

Since the night Leo brought me here, the fountain has become my absolute favorite place in the whole of the dragon castle.

The only place I can come to think.

And in recent times, I have been thinking a lot.

Which is something that tends to happen when you have found out that you are somehow in possession of powers that you are not even supposed to have.

Or that you might even been human.

I push off the bowl of the fountain and hop down to the floor.

It is cold out and my cloak is not doing much of anything to ward off the chilly autumn air.

I should be in bed.

Everyone, Henette included actually does think that I am in bed, but this night had turned out to be one of those nights where I just could not fall asleep.

So I had wandered into Midas' study and snuck out a book and then somehow found my way here.

Returning back into the castle, I turn left, back towards his study.

The book is written in the dragon tongue and full of words that I do not even fully understand but I had thought some mindless reading would help me fall asleep quickly.

I had been wrong.

It talked about the magic that existed in the 5th realm. Their Ryders and dragons.

The things they could do and the things they couldn't.

Funny enough there had been no mention of dragon Ryder being about to fly without first fully transforming into their dragon form which is something I have seen Midas do not once but three times now.

All in all there had been nothing mindless about the book and now, I wanted more.

His study is almost never locked.

Who would dare steal from the dragon King?

So again I simply push open the heavy wooden door and step into the darkened space.

The only source of illumination is the full moon outside that sends shaft of bright light through the impressively large window behind his chair.

I decided not to light the candle sitting on the edge of his desk and to simply use the moon's light to return the book back to its position.

Big mistake.

You would think by now, that as one of the least graceful people to ever walk the 7 realms, I would know that moving through a dark room without a light is a very terrible idea.

But seeing as I do not always think things through, I attempt to anyway.

And I do succeed, for the most part.

I manage to return the book to its location on the shelf but when I turn around to move to the next shelf, my dress gets caught on something.

In my defense, it was quiet and dark and there was an eerie hooting noise coming from outside the window.

Anyone would have reacted the way I did if they thought some strange night creature had gotten a hold of their cloak and was now determined to drag them to the underworld.

All this is to say that I may have...over reacted a little bit by leaping a mile in to the air and grabbing onto the shelf a little too hard.

Turns out it was designed for the weight of books not, scared, leaping humans.

So it fell.

They all did.

I barely managed to jump out of the way before one could topple on me and split my skull open.

And now I am standing in the middle of Midas's study, hands over my mouth wondering how I am going to be able to explain to him and the rest of the castle that some monster snuck into his study and destroyed everything.

I do not have to wait very long.

"Would you like a mace so you can break them apart properly?"

My heart stops.

He shakes his head, ankles crossed and arms folded as he leans on the open door of his study.

"Two weeks Hera. Two weeks and you are already trying to send my castle crumbling to the ground. What in all the realms would happen if...humph..."

He catches me and holds me against him, my arms wrapped around his neck.

"Easy...easy...you have an amazingly strong grip for such a tiny human"

He smells like sweat and dirt and hours upon hours of hard riding but I do not care.

He came back to me. That is all that matters.

"I am unsure if you are hugging me or trying to choke me."

"Both"

He must hear the tears in my voice because he strokes my hair gently before pulling back and placing me on my feet so he can look at me.

"What is the matter, are you hurt?"

I almost cannot believe he is asking me that but he looks so genuinely confused and worried that I burst out laughing unable to even stay mad at him.

I shake my head and wipe at the tears on my cheeks. "I'm just so happy."

He smiles one of those rare smiles of his that makes me feel like maybe coming to this realm was not the most terrible thing that has ever happen to me.

The he pulls me back against him, burying his face in my hair

"Gods you smell like Heaven."

I stroke his hair, rub my hands up and down his arms. "Midas..."

"Hmmm?"

"How are you?"

He stiffens and something tells me that he has not been asked that question in a long...long time.

He holds me tighter and I can almost feel the exhaustion in the weight of his body, in the way his arms crush me almost painfully to his chest.

“I am fine.”

“Liar.”

He scoffs. “Still as disrespectful as ever.”

“Don’t try to change the topic.”

He is quiet for a long time and I almost start to worry that he had managed to fall asleep standing in my arms.

But then he sighs, deep and heavy into my hair.

“I am tired Hera. Nothing is going the way it is supposed to and for the first time in my life, I have absolutely no idea what to do.”

And because I do not know what to say to that, I do the best thing that I can.

I hold him.